Pauline Marois, former Prime Minister of Quebec, announced her resignation as the leader of the Parti Québécois, after losing the anticipated elections in the Canadian province, which were won by the Parti Libéral du Québec, on April 7th.
On April 8th of the current year, Stéphane Dion, Member of Parliament for Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Quebec, in the Canadian House of Commons, congratulated Philippe Couillard, leader of the Parti Libéral du Québec, on their victory in the elections in his province, held the day before. In his statement in the Parliament, Dion highlighted that the new government seeks to create jobs and to expand Quebec’s economy within a united Canada, one that builds on the solidarity that binds all Canadians and gives them a strength that they would not otherwise possess.1

Dion’s statement was made on the occasion of the provincial elections held the previous day to congratulate Quebeckers and in particular the leader of its own party. However, despite the courtesy and the expected happiness, an important consideration on the elections themselves is made in his statement. In order to understand it, it is necessary to point out briefly what happened the day before and to connect it to the short legislature that ended.

If Philippe Couillard, defender of the Canadian unity, was the great winner, the major defeated was Pauline Marois, who chaired the minority provincial executive council as the leader of the separatists of the Parti Québécois. The defeat of the separatists was particularly painful for them because the Provincial Prime Minister brought elections forward, hoping that it would be a favorable chance to increase her parliamentary support. The result shows opportunism prevailed over the chance and the Parti Québécois registered its major defeat in more than forty years. Marois obtained 54 Members of Parliament out of the total 125 Members of Provincial Parliament in the elections of 2012. During the elections held on April 7th, her Members of the Provincial Parliament decreased to 30 (25.37% of the

votes). In turn, her opponents from the Parti Libéral du Québec, who support the Canadian unity, increased from 50 Members of the Provincial Parliament to 70 (41% of the votes), obtaining an overwhelming majority. The rest of the seats are shared out among the Coalition Avenir Québec, autonomists that want to remove, for the moment, the issue about the Quebec succession form their political agenda and which increased from 19 to 22 seats (23.07% of the votes); and left-wing separatists of Québec Solidaire that increased from 2 to 3 seats. It is obvious that it is not worthy to stop and analyze the results of the latter groups mentioned. Québec Solidaire is a party that takes part in all the moral causes in vogue and that meets the young people’s demand of a political idealism without a real commitment with reality. Nonetheless, the Coalition Avenir Québec is an interesting case.

This party was created only in 2011 by François Legault and Charles Sirois. On the occasion of the creation of the party, Legault, who was a major member of the Parti Québécois, stated that the distinctive component presented was future. Under his point of view, Quebec should undertake a new path after forty years in which the province was lead to a dead end. According to their political program, future meant a change of era in the provincial politics; it meant to leave aside the constant questioning of the Canadian unity through the reiterated and incessant independence referendums. According to Legault the referendum question is a past issue. What he supports is the necessity of giving back to Quebec the force it has within the federation which has been declined constantly during the past forty years; force intended in terms of demography, of economics and in terms of influence and decision-making capacity. Quebec is poorer and has less power within the Canadian context. The most tangible result of the Quebec’s pro-independent movement was the weakening of Quebec.
In view of the result of the elections of the past April 7th, Legault spoke more frankly. In his opinion, the Parti Québécois lost the relation with its voters: they do not want to hear about separatist dreams.

In the expressive words of Legault, the pro-independent people’s imaginary country is damaging the real country. Moreover, he added that elections were in practice a quasi-referendum. We will return to the issue later. Now it is enough to point out that after the past elections the Parti Québécois is the favorite political party with 25.37% of the province voters, followed closely by the Coalition Avenir Quebec with 23.07%. To which of the two parties belongs the future of identity politics in Quebec?

Stéphane Dion, after congratulating on the victory of his colleagues through the statement mentioned before, made a deeper assessment on the political meaning of the elections. According to him, even if it was said that the key factor of the campaign was the fear of another referendum, the result does not show the fear, but the expression of a rational election. As Thomas Hobbes said with insight at the dawn of modernity, language can be a means to create harmony among men through eloquence, but it is also the main means used by people who encourage the discord to make their own interest to succeed. In his most well-known work, the *Leviathan*, he said that where some men see fear, others see wisdom and what is just a terrible regicide, some people can define it as a tyrannicide. That is why Hobbes sought to create a political science in which he gave to each concept the right meaning so that harmony could not be broken by the self-interest and passionate use of the language. Many attempts of putting into practice the Hobbesian political science project have been made, anyway in the political context many actors made an instrumental use of the language to mobilize interests and to in-
crease discord. Therefore, it would be naïve to think that today’s opportunist politicians should renounce this means so useful to them.

Consequently, political science is not the one who has to solve the political language problem, but another politics has to reveal the interests and passions that are misused in the political language. Stéphane Dion named this politics as “the clarity policy”. His aim was as simple as the one denounced by Hobbes: Quebeckers have been pushed by pro-independents to turn the identity defense into hostility towards Canada, even to the detriment of their own interests as Quebeckers and Canadians. Therefore, it was necessary to change the political debate language in Quebec and to reveal the elevated cost for Quebeckers that could be entailed in the renounce of their condition as Canadians. This cost refers not only to economics, but also to the collective identity.

Stéphane Dion entrance in politics happened in 1996 through the invitation of the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. Dion, who was a Political Science professor until that moment, was tasked with designing a policy that included, in a democratic form, the secessionist impetus encouraged by the Parti Québécois. The main instrument for this impetus in order to put into practice its political ideology was to use the power that Canadian provincial administrations have to call consultative referendums. It is important to insist that these referendums, even if in theory they are consultative, they were presented as a means to exercise the right of self-determination which provinces do not have constitutionally. In fact, against what the self-interest supporters of the Quebec’s referendum experiences said, in Canada the right to decide does not exist; neither the right to secession and of course and nor the right to a unilateral secession. Actually, the only thing related to secession admitted constitutionally in Canada is that is a matter of politics. This means that if the secession issue arises in some Canadian province and there are clarity conditions, i.e. democratic ones, a political process would be opened up and it could eventually lead to the independence of that province. This would entail a re-founding of Canada.
In this way, Jean Chrétien asked Dion to undertake the fight against Quebec’s separatism from the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs. The year before, the second referendum was held in which the “yes” almost reaches the majority. The most long-lasting result of Dion’s activity in the Ministry was the Clarity Act of 2000 which is an act whose effect on the future of Quebec’s independence cannot be disdained.

However, Quebec’s pro-independent groups are not interested in the democratic purity process, but in the creation of a circumstance in which a consultative referendum could be presented as an expression of the Quebecker’s will in favor of the independence. Consequently they will try to base this circumstance on the independence of the province. This is an adventurous idea because of its lack of basis and because it cannot be accepted in terms of democratic conception. In order to do so, they distort the political language so much that Hobbes probably turned in his grave when he saw the little effect that his political science had on the posterity. In this way, the question of the first referendum held on 1980 said as follows:

“The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad – in other words, sovereignty – and at the same time to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; any change in political status resulting from these negotiations will only be implemented with popular approval through another referendum; on these terms, do you give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?”

Of course Quebec’s voters showed an outstanding capacity to read between the lines and to not get confused by the chaos of ideas, so that the “yes” obtained

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1 485 852 votes (40.44%) and the “no” 2 187 991 (59.56%). However, the referendum did not settle the independence issue; this is a warning to the people who think that the right to decide exists and it is an instrument of democratic clarification. Under the Quebecker separatists’ point of view, the referendum unfavorable result does not mean the rejection of the cause supported, but it simply postpones the execution of it. But in the event of a favorable result, consequently an irreversible and definitive situation will take place. Within the political rhetoric of the first referendum aroused the idea that the legitimate objective was to turn Quebec into a political sovereign actor, which apparently forms part of the democratic logic. This is the reason why separatists are called pro-sovereign groups and this phenomenon has been imitated in other places.

However, sovereignty as a democratic doctrine has its own difficulties. As John Dewey, the American philosopher of the democracy, once said, sovereignty was the definition of the unconditional power of an absolute monarch who was responsible for his/her actions only before God. The sovereignty doctrine originated in Europe with the beginning of the modern era and it meant the absolute support of the irresponsible and unlimited power of the monarch, rather than the support of the parliaments and the universal powers who sought to limit and to condition it. The national sovereignty doctrine of nationalism is the transposition of this form of absolute power to an abstract collective actor with dire consequences for freedom. In fact, the democratic theory that fuels representative democracies sought to not carry out sovereignty, but to limit it through federalism, declarations of rights, etc. Democracy consists in limiting sovereignty, the irrational and unconditional power in order to ensure and protect individual freedom.
However, since the first referendum of 1980 separatists were related to the “sovereignty” label and the supporters of the maintenance of the Canadian unity with the “federalist” label, since to federate means to unify and it is important to repeat it as the meaning of the word has been distorted by the political language.

Fifteen years later, in 1995, the second referendum was held in which the independence of Quebec was voted implicitly. This time the question was shorter, even if clarity could be improved:

“Do you agree that Québec should become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Québec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?” 3

In this occasion, the result of the vote was once again “no”, but the margin was so small that Jean Chrétien called Stéphane Dion in order to ask him to face the challenge which now was ineludible. In the light of the questions presented to the Quebeckers, the clarity issue became a must which cannot be postponed and this was the origin of the Clarity Act.

According to Dion’s perception and the perception of the most part of the Quebeckers, which are the ones who have faced the most the independence issue of their province, the different identity issue of Quebec must be understood and not be considered as a minor issue. In fact, in this context the difference is the mobi-

lizing element for the independence. The vast majority of the Quebeckers are French-speakers and they consider themselves as a linguistic island in the middle of an enormous ocean of 325 million English-speaking people. In this sense, the identity awareness is the fuel used by the Parti Québécois as a mobilization instrument. For this reason any movement that aims at fighting secessionism must take into account this issue and deal with it with the greatest caution. But it has also to take into account something more: the most part of the Quebeckers does not want the independence; the most part of the Quebeckers feels both Quebecker and Canadian and the two identities do not enter into conflict. Finally, the most part of the Quebeckers does not want a third referendum.

For all these reasons, the Parti Québécois is situated in a complicated framework: its political resource is the identity mobilization, but at the same time, the Quebecker’s identity is not the exclusivist and xenophobic identity promoted by this party. This is the reason why, at the beginning, the electoral campaign had comic-tragic overtones when Pierre Karl Péladeau, news magnate that entered in politics, declared that if the PQ won, a third secession referendum would be held, as set in the permanent agenda of the party. But, the most experienced leaders try to reach it in a less openly way. For the most, the cry of Péladeau “On veut un pays!” sentenced the PQ’s electoral life. Moreover, the third referendum had the extraordinary effect of turning elections into a quasi-referendum, as defined Legault, mentioned before. In other words, by putting on the table something that the most part of Quebeckers refuses as a government proposal, the PQ converted elections into a referendum and it registered the major defeat of its history.

Obviously, in the political field any electoral process does not establish definite solutions. And, as we mentioned before, the identity element is essential in Quebec’s politics and it can be activated again in any occasion that can be considered as a threat. However, other societies that are going through similar situations can learn from the Quebec’s experience about how secessionism has been managed. The first lesson and the most evident one is that identity mobilization needs an in-
telligent and extended response in which feelings should be mitigated by a rational debate. Regarding the Quebec’s issue it is very important to ensure to the population of the French-speaking province the benefits and the protection of their culture as well as to explain once and again the advantages that the union can offer to all the Canadians. This process of public enlightenment requires time and serenity, but at the end perseverance will prevail over the ephemeral passion of the rough offences of the people who seek discord.

In order to do so, it is important to calm identity anxiety as well as to focus the debate on the costs of the secession. Separatists present secession processes as operations in which there are only benefits and the expenditure column remains empty. One of the most important and emphasized parts of Dion’s clarity policy is to show that secession processes lead to situations where irreversible consequences persist for generations. These situations require, no matter what separatists say, a certain amount of time, efforts and great resources, and the people involved must know it in advance in order to make a decision freely.

Obviously, as it was to be expected, Quebecker separatists refuse the clarity policy because it establishes a threshold of democratic quality which makes the split of Quebec unattainable under these circumstances. Moreover, they also refuse evidently the Clarity Act and, as all nationalists do, they claim for an original sovereignty that belongs to them as a nation and that it is more important than any democratic or constitutional order, as all nationalists say. However, the clarity policy does not aim at convincing national separatists, but it aims at informing Quebeckers. And even if separatists refused it by claiming for sovereignty, in practice they have been replaced by it, and this is reason of the result of the provincial elections.

The first referendum was held in 1980; the second one fifteen years later, in 1995; and the third one, for the most part of the population, happened almost twenty years later, in the elections of April 2014. Therefore, it seems that the clar-
Identity mobilization needs an intelligent response and a rational debate. It is very important to ensure to the Quebeckers the protection of their culture as well as to explain once and again the advantages that the union can offer to all the Canadians.

Identity policy has been effective and that a new referendum in Quebec will take decades before being feasible. Therefore, it is expected that the clarity policy will be useful not only to clarify Quebeckers about their position in Canada, but also to inspire people that imitate PQ’s policy in other places in order to reach similar goals by using the same instruments. In fact, despite the differences between Canada and other countries that face the same secessionist challenges there is a lot to learn from the comparison and the Canadian lesson is very valuable.

Stéphane Dion, in the statement we commented before, points out that the elections of the past April 7th in Quebec should be interpreted as “it was a vote against separating from Canada and against the idea of a third referendum. It was a vote in favour of being both Québécois and Canadian, a vote against discrimination among Quebeckers and a vote in favour of an inclusive Quebec.” If this hermeneutic of the Quebecker vote would be confirmed, we would really face a radical change in the politics of the province and the end of a sovereign era in which the most visible result is the decadence of Quebec within the federation.

Moreover, we could also face a radical change in the Quebecker political system, where for the first time the identity policy is not in the hands of the PQ anymore; identity pluralism, represented by the Parti Liberal of Quebec and the Coalition Avenir Quebec, will be the normal practice in politics and it will reflect the identity

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pluralism of the Quebec society. People who, by supporting other independence movements, seek to cut, decrease and/or limit the identities of the people they say they support, they should learn a lot from this example.

Are we facing the end of the sovereign-separatist cycle in Quebec? It is too early to answer this question, but looking back to the past decades the secession issue has never been set aside from Quebecker’s interests as much as nowadays; and the Parti Québécois has never faced such a serious identity crisis.

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